

Trinity 12 (HC)

I want to speak to you this morning on the subject of **The Peril of Success**. But, first, a story.

It is about a man named William Cowper.

I don't know if you have heard of him. He was a contemporary to John Wesley and George Whitefield in England and Jonathan Edwards in America, and is regarded as one of the best early Romantic poets.

Wonderfully talented, nevertheless, a sad figure. A sad figure because adversity haunted his life almost from birth.

--His mother died when he was six.

--He was unable to marry the girl he loved because her father failed to give assent to the marriage.

--He experienced serious depression that bordered on insanity, thus acquiring from his biographers the name "Mad Cowper".

--Three times he attempted suicide and was sent to an asylum for recovery.

During one of these stays. He came to deep personal Christian faith, but trouble did not go away from his life. One biographer wrote: "Salvation changed his heart, but not his propensity for melancholy."

Poor Cowper. Yet, in spite of his troubles, he remained aware of God at work in his life. Indeed, the words of the hymn with which we opened this service came from his own pen:

*God moves in a mysterious way
his wonders to perform.*

These words are autobiographical. At many times God's ways were hidden from Cowper; yet, God continued at work in his life, as it were behind the scenes.

Something similar might be said of Joseph in today's Old Testament lesson. He too had many adversities in his life.

Sold into slavery by his brothers. Falsely accused by the wife of his master in Egypt. Cast into prison for a period of around 11 years.

Joseph could easily have become bitter and cursed God. Yet, he did not do so.

Cowper's words "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform" might well be used in reference to Joseph's life.

Trouble, instead of breaking him, made him . . . made him strong.

The psalmist would go on to say "iron entered into his soul."

Perhaps, as you look back over your life, you can see something similar going on. Trouble driving you to your knees, causing you to trust God, really trust Him, and, out beyond that trouble, a strength and wisdom and ability that you would never have had, had you not passed through this dark valley.

Again, to quote the Psalmist: "**It is good for me that I have been in trouble: that I may learn thy statutes**" (119:71)

Perhaps at this very moment you find yourself in the midst of some sort of trouble. Give it to the Lord. Remember: **God – the God who loved you so much that sent His one and only son to die for you -- does not want to break you, but to make you. "He wants to turn your scars into stars,"** as one preacher was fond of saying.

In Joseph's case out from great trouble came great success. He ends up second only to Pharaoh in Egypt.

The remarkable thing is that Joseph dealt with success as prudently as he had with adversity.

The Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle once said: "**For every one hundred men who can stand adversity there is only one who can withstand prosperity.**"

Joseph was that one out of a hundred.

Isn't that an interesting concept? Perhaps you have known people for whom success was their downfall.

Some years ago, I officiated at a wedding at which the groom's last name was "Samples".

I was naturally curious (I'm dating myself here) if he was related to the late, great Junior Samples on Hee Haw, the Country Music show.

As it turned out, he was. Jr. Samples was his first cousin.

"What was Junior was like in real life," I eagerly asked.

The answer I received was: "What you saw was what you got."

He went on to say that he could make good shine, run a sawmill and tell lies (tall tales).

But the sad thing about Junior's life was that 'success' was his downfall. When he was living hand-to-mouth, he was doing okay.

But, after achieving celebrity status and having plenty of money, he, as the old-timers say, became 'bad to drink', and that was what hastened his demise.

Success . . . how do you deal with it?

Well, we can learn a valuable lesson from Joseph. That lesson is: **Never forget where success comes from.**

From time to time, *Forbes* and other magazines carry articles about *self-made* billionaires. We seem to be fascinated by such people and their story.

I think if someone had used that term 'self-made' to describe Joseph, he would have taken exception to it. The reason I say this comes from the names he gives his two sons: Ephraim and Manasseh.

Down beyond where we left off reading, we find the meaning of these two names.

In verse 51, we read: “**And Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh: “For God, said he, hath made me forget all my toil, and all my father's house.”**

In the following verse: “**And the name of the second called he Ephraim: For God hath caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction.**”

What or whom does Joseph credit for his success?

His business acumen? His hard work? His people skills?

No, none of these things. “**For God hath caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction,**” he says.

There is another Old Testament character who does the exact opposite. I am thinking of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon.

In the fourth chapter of Daniel, we find this great king out walking, surveying the splendour of this great kingdom. Here is what he says:

**“Is not this great Babylon, that I have built
... by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?”**

Unlike Joseph, he does not give glory to God, but to himself. This is dangerous thing.

In Nebuchadnezzar’s case, the Bible tells us that God punished him. He went mad and for seven years was forced to live outside in the field and eat grass like an animal.

I suppose it is easy to fall into this trap. When success comes and people start telling you how great you are, you might well be tempted to believe them and to say (at least to yourself):

“You know they are right. I am a pretty special guy. I worked hard, got the job done, did it my ways, and now, by golly, I am getting the recognition I deserve.”

It may be tempting to stick out your chest and to say such things, but don’t do it. Pride, as you were taught as a child, cometh before a fall.

I once heard about a Roman Catholic cleric whose mother told him on the day he was made a bishop: “**Stand up straight and try not to look to look too pleased with yourself.**”

Mothers have a way of giving it to us straight, haven’t they?

Joseph sets us a good example in receiving success. He saw in it God’s hand at work.

Let me hasten to say that there is such a thing as proper pride in accomplishment. The pride I am thinking of leads to wonder and thanksgiving that God can “use a country boy like me.”

That is the way I feel when I walk around the campus here at St. Luke’s. This is not my doings; it is the Lord’s. Nevertheless, God has and continues to use people like you and me to accomplish His purposes. There is peril in success; but there is also glory.

Life is gift, from beginning to end. Never forget it.

This morning I encourage *you* to look back over your life and whisper:

“Thank you, Lord, for not only saving my soul but also for giving me a purpose, for setting before me challenges, and, yes, from time to time, for giving me some thrilling successes . . . but most of all for walking beside me through the dark valleys no less than along the tall vistas.”

At the end of the day, about all any one of us can say is: **To God be the glory, great things He has done!**